Modernist Monstrosity in Rimbaud's Verse and Prose Poetry

> *In morality and talent, this Rimbaud, aged between 15 and 16, was and is a monster. He can construct poems like no one else, but his works are completely incomprehensible and repulsive.*[1]

Monstrosity is an integral part of the transformative project of modernism, across time and across media, expanding the boundaries of what it is to know and to feel, and deepening our understanding of what it is to be human. The genealogy of modernist monstrosity is as multifarious and hybrid as monsters themselves. In visual culture of the sixteenth century, we marvel at the grotesque faces incrusted with fruits and vegetables and imbued with humour and humanity that were created by the Mannerist painter Arcimboldo; in the modern era, the half-porcine, half-papal figurations produced by Francis Bacon confront us viscerally with visions of human frailty; on the page, and on screen, we are drawn to the luminous horror that is Frankenstein's monster (Mary Shelley, 1818), and we empathize with the vulnerable metropolitan vampires that populate Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936). This quartet of examples reminds us that monstrosity is synonymous, in transhistorical and transcultural terms, with the collapsing of distinctions, with visionary aesthetics, and with a profoundly ethical vision alert to human constraint and human capacity.

Rimbaud's poetry and his poetics contribute to the literary and cultural genealogy of monstrosity in the Western modern era. His figuring of the monstrous weaves cultural, aesthetic, and ethical relations with other major explorations of multiform monstrosity in the same period: Hugo's *L'Homme qui rit* (1869) draws on the tradition of fairground 'monsters' and their purveyors, a context evoked by Rimbaud in his letter of 15 May 1871 to Paul Demeny; Lautréamont's morphing, mordant Maldoror offers a lacerating analysis of the pusillanimous and monstrous soul of the reader (*Les Chants de Maldoror*, 1868–69); and Baudelaire's everyday

[1] The epigraph quotation (1870) is from a police constable's report on the vagrant poet, reproduced in Graham Robb, *Rimbaud* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2001), pp. 177–78.

monsters – those marginal mysteries that are the aged and the blind – inspire first horror and then awe in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1861, second edition). Baudelaire's poetry reveals the source of monstrosity in pre-formed impressions, assumptions, and clichés, whose 'horror' the poet magnifies or intensifies in order to deconstruct it and to engage the empathic revision of our perspectives and values. Explicit monsters, intermittently present, cede to more pervasive and subtle forms of monstrosity – 'ennui', modernity's defining mental symptom, is figured, in the preface poem of *Les Fleurs du mal* 'Au lecteur', as the 'monstre délicat', pervasive, insidious, unvanquishable.

Multiform monsters abound in Rimbaud's poetry, from the earliest *Poésies* (1870-71) through *Une saison en enfer* (1873) to *Illuminations* (1886): there are the rutting Behemoths and rotting Leviathan of 'Le Bateau ivre'; Belzebuth in the 'Bal des pendus'; the hypocritical horror that is the eponymous Tartuffe, exposed (in both senses) by another monster 'le Méchant' who is the embodiment of corrective malice'; and the child-sacrificing Moloch(s) of 'Parade'. In an important textual and phonetic reading of multiform monstrosity in 'Parade', Bruno Claisse explores the figure of the Sphinx-like narrator of 'Parade' and argues for the text to be understood as a teratological enigma that has its source in Rimbaud's interrogation of what it is to be human in *Une saison en enfer* in the face of obfuscation and metaphysical mystification.[2] There are two competing monstrosities envisioned in 'Parade', Claisse argues: the monstrosity that is in flight from rugged reality; the monstrosity that embraces transformational existence. Whilst Claisse relates 'Parade' to other key explorations of monstrosity and humanity, including *Une saison en enfer*, it is urgent now to embark on a wider reading of monstrosity in Rimbaud's poetry for the monster is a more pervasive and more protean figure in the probing of cultural, political, social, and aesthetic values than Rimbaud criticism has to date recognised.

Through the evocation of horrors that are 'named' and shared across Western cultures, Rimbaud's poetry makes its deep connection with representations of monstrosity in classical, biblical, and literary sources. Beyond the 'familiar' monsters of literary and iconographic tradition, there are the everyday bogeymen – bloated bourgeois and stinking priests – of the earliest poems (*Poésies*) that are the targets of

[2] Bruno Claisse, '"Parade ou l'œuvre-monstre"', in Les Illuminations *et l'accession au réel* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2012), pp. 93–113.

Rimbaud's highly imaged satire.[3] Crucially, there are the monstrous metamorphoses of the modernist imagination that give flesh to the proclamation 'Je est un autre', in the letter to Georges Izambard (13 May 1871) where Rimbaud declares poetry's ceaseless mutability and its boundless transformative capacity.[4]

In *Une saison en enfer*, the fantastical staging of otherness spawns a monstrous cast that encompasses abhorred 'chrétiens', ferocious 'paiens', furious 'écorcheurs de bêtes', indeterminate 'race(s) inférieure(s), an atypical 'Satan', a scrofulous emperor, a maniacal magistrate, an unnamed 'idiot', an unidentified 'bête', and a generic 'hyène'. In the sequence entitled 'L'Eclair', the tortured self seeks solace and diversion in a world of protean possibilities ('amours monstres et univers fantastiques') that quickly forecloses in a social fantasy populated by predictable role-players and ritualized performances:

> Ma vie est usée. Allons ! Feignons, fainéantons, ô pitié ! Et nous existerons en nous amusant, en rêvant amours monstres et univers fantastiques, en nous plaignant et en querellant **les apparences du monde, saltimbanque, mendiant, artiste, bandit, – prêtre !** (my emphasis)

We sense, in *Une saison en enfer*, that the auto-fictional text is extending and diversifying the monstrous genealogy of 'Le Bateau ivre' with its crucifying 'Peaux-Rouges' and its terrifying crossbred 'panthères à peaux d'homme'. At the same time, *Une saison en enfer* looks back to one of the earliest texts of *Poésies*, 'Soleil et chair' (1870), where the poet portrays humanity as cloaked in ignorance, constrained by chimeras, and reduced to a simian simulacrum of itself:

> Nous ne pouvons savoir ! – Nous sommes accablés
> D'un manteau d'ignorance et d'étroites chimères
> Singes d'homme tombés de la vulve des mères
> Notre pâle raison nous cache l'infini. (Part III, ll. 41–44)

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[3] The satirical representation of the bourgeois is central to 'A la musique' (*Poésies*): 'Tous les bourgeois poussifs qu'étranglent les chaleurs / Portent, les jeudis soirs, leurs bêtises jalouses', There is a more visceral articulation of disgust in the portrait of the insalubrious, hypocritical priest of 'Les Premières Communions' (*Poésies*): ' […] quinze laids marmots, encrassant les piliers / Ecoutent, grasseyant les divins babillages, / Un noir grotesque dont fermentent les souliers'.

[4] *Arthur Rimbaud, Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Antoine Adam (Paris: Gallimard, 'Pléiade', 1972), 249. References to this edition are hereafter abbreviated as *ŒC*, followed by page number.

The horror that has the power to scandalize (and fascinate) the reader is the necessary horror that nourishes critical lucidity and stimulates creativity as it challenges shibboleths, transforms degraded values, and renews poetic language. I will argue that monstrosity – powerfully and pervasively embodied – is constitutive of social, cultural, and political fantasy in Rimbaud's poetry. Monstrosity is foundational in the poet's critique of material modernity (and its attendant manifestations: bourgeois progress, mercantilism, colonialism), and is integral to his related pursuit of modernist innovation: monstrosity is the inescapable confrontation with the unspeakable and the abject that shines light on social constraint and on aesthetic (self-)limitation. Monstrosity is also, at the same time, the energizing force that offers a radical re-visioning of poetry and inaugurates the exploration of an unprecedented visionary dimension.

The term 'monstrosity' has its double-headed etymological origins in *monstrare* (Latin: to show, to reveal) and in *monere* (Latin: to warn): modernism captures both meanings in its revelatory and speculative aspects. Social, cultural, and political fantasy in Rimbaud's writing is driven by 'monstering', the aggravated embodiment of moral or ethical failings and fallibilities. Monstrosity projects a critical light on what it is to be human, which necessitates the holding up to scrutiny of a soul that is monstrous, and, more than this, requires the salutary process of 'self-monstering': 'il s'agit de faire l'âme monstrueuse: à l'instar des comprachicos, quoi! Imaginez un homme s'implantant et se cultivant des verrues sur le visage' (letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871).[5] Drawing on the allusion, in Hugo's *L'Homme qui rit*, to the trafficking of children as fairground freaks in seventeenth-century England, the poet is intent upon holding up a mirror to himself, and to the reader. In this specular move, the monstrous and the human are closely entwined. The purpose of a warning (*monere*) is to unsettle us, to cause us to reflect, and to urge us to remedy what is threatening or aversive, so monsters have an ethical mission to fulfil. Monstering in Rimbaud's figural economy works actively upon the reader, challenging ingrained values, contesting normative logic, subverting reason, and causing the conditions of reading themselves to morph in the visionary poetics of 'Le Bateau ivre' and 'Voyelles' and in the shape-shifting prose of *Illuminations*.

[5] *ŒC*, 251.

Often monstrosity and aesthetic innovation have reciprocal agency: the modernist writer invokes monstrosity, and monstrosity (and related forms of horror) make possible the figurative pursuit of the non-normative (or anti-normative) positions and protean values that define the modernist project. The modernist assault on conventions and on taste lends itself to monstrosity, and monstrosity creates in turn a space of fresh confrontation, action, displacement, transformation, and recognition. In this reading of monstrosity, I will do some monstrous mixing of my own and work back and forth between Rimbaud's early verse poems (*Poésies*) and the auto-fictional narrative *Une saison en enfer*, and combine this with some excursions into *Illuminations*. I will ask: what is the value of monstrosity in the social, cultural, and political fantasy that defines Rimbaud's poetry? How does the monstrous body move and morph within and between texts? What does that tell us about embodied experience and about being in the world? How does Rimbaud's fuller vision of monstrosity relate to his modernist project?

Attracting fear, disgust, loathing, and fascination, monstrosity always implies an embodied form. The monster is what we see or touch, and it is what sees and touches us: so, the embodiment of monstrosity has a deep, inalienable relation to our own corporeality and our sense of being in the world. Rimbaud's monsters take multiple embodied forms: a hybrid population that manifests itself, as monsters must, in visions of extreme or dysmorphic corporeality (the body is warped, fused, leaking, suppurating). That population ranges from the monsters of canonical pedigree (like the Devil, the Behemoth, and Leviathan), to those everyday horrors on which the poet seeks revenge through social fantasy and satire. Bodily dysmorphia and dysfunction translate into 'outputs' that assail the sensorium of the narrator and, vicariously, engage the reader's sensory memory-work. If Rimbaud's poetry probes the perspective of the monster's victim or object (the narrator–viewer and the implied reader), it also, significantly, explores monstrosity *from the inside*: we are drawn into the inner life of monstrous forms and, conversely, from our readerly experience of the monstrous sensorium, springs a more lucid consciousness of self. This is consonant with the modernist process of constantly 'flipping' perspectives, keeping competing perspectives simultaneously in play, inverting values, and pursuing indeterminacy as to where one subjectivity ends and another begins: modernist inter-subjectivity connects diverse forms of embodiment that spur horror and, paradoxically, stir empathy as they prompt recognition and self-recognition.

Central to embodied monstrosity is the abject. The saturation of Rimbaud's poetic world with the language of blood, sores, holes, sweat, muck, leakages, stains, spillages, and scars that are the insistent signs of the body breaching its integrity, turning itself inside out, emptying itself even. In this respect Rimbaud's poetry and his related writing seem to prefigure Julia Kristeva's theorizing of the encounter with the abject that precedes entry into the symbolic order: the abject is revealed in our confrontation with chaos, with ab-normality, and with the lack of stabilizing distinction.[6] If stains, sweat, and blood are the tenacious everyday signs of what makes us human, they are no less powerfully identified with the abject and the archaic, with the space that exists *before* language begins its work of separating, and differentiating between, subject and object, between self and other: the narrator's and the reader's confrontation with the pre-linguistic *brute* of *Une saison en enfer* represents the face-to-face with the real and recognition of the embodied abject that is the *fons et origo* of human experience.

In focusing on the representation of the senses and the abject, I contend that Rimbaud's monstrosity both includes and exceeds purely visual horror: in this, his writing contributes to the long modern tradition of resistance to the purely ocular-centric, a tradition that describes much twentieth- and twenty-first-century critical thought and creative practice.[7] Rimbaud's monstrosity articulates a more complex (and conflictual) sense of being in the world where the senses mingle and merge, coincide and co-act, and where the hegemony of the visual is constantly troubled and transformed. Across the *Poésies*, *Une saison en enfer*, and *Illuminations*, horror materializes in forms of haptic depth, olfactory pervasiveness, acoustic disturbance, and chromatic force: this is integral to Rimbaud's aesthetic, which is visionary in its expansion *beyond* the visual and the ocular as it probes a more deeply embodied, more pervasive, and properly transformative experience. The grotesque body is the site where the morphing of the senses emerges most powerfully and insistently in the present tense, so we 'hear' the language of monstrosity, envision the horror, and live

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[6] Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

[7] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1994), challenges reductive readings of a unitary visual regime and argues for a more pluralist understanding of visual practice, linked to a fuller alertness to all the senses. Rimbaud's poetry (whose visionary project Jay touches on but does not scrutinize) demands to be understood as adventurous in its exploration of vision, both 'everyday' and visionary, its critique of reductive scopic attitudes, and its performative opening out to experimental sensory practices.

it, vicariously, in the present of our act of reading, remembering, and imagining. By considering the senses individually and collaboratively, we can discern how Rimbaud's poetry constantly works across and between sensory categories, with each sense explored as an inter-sense. The monstrous in Rimbaud's poetry takes us into the deep of the subjective self, to the place where perception and percipience coincide with memory, fears, anxiety, cupidity, guilt, desire, and repugnance. In what follows, some startling collocations of the senses reveal something of the complexity of embodied monstrosity in Rimbaud's poetry.

Stinking sounds

In the social fantasy that targets provincial pieties, the halitosis of the indigent parishioners connects with sensory aggravations that are haptic, visual, acoustic, and thermal, as well as olfactory, in nature:

> **Parqués** entre des bancs de chêne, aux coins de l'église
> **Qu'attiédit puamment leur souffle**, **tous leurs yeux**
> Vers le chœur ruisselant d'orrie et la maîtrise
> **Aux vingt gueules gueulant** les cantiques pieux.
>
> **Comme un parfum de pain humant l'odeur de cire**
> Heureux, humiliés **comme des chiens battus**
> Les Pauvres au bon Dieu, le patron et le sire
> **Tendent leurs oremus** risibles et têtus.
>
> ('Les Pauvres à l'église' ll. 1–8, my emphasis)

The softly breathing human mouths morph, metaphorically, into the maws of the barking beasts of the choir (l. 4), whilst further auditory dissonance erupts in the metamorphosis of aged female churchgoers into a wordless chorus of animal noise and infra-linguistic human sound-making ('alentour, geint, nasille et chuchote / Une collection de vieilles à fanons', ll. 19–20). In the same poem, bourgeois ladies with liver afflictions make their *green* smiles at the congregation and proffer their yellow fingers to be kissed, an instance that combines tactile repugnance and gustatory horror in those pus-coloured tones.

In 'Accroupissements', a related poetic assault on religiosity, acoustic values merge with visual and haptic instances, creating a nauseating mixture where the abject surfaces in the unnatural *transplanting* of sound. Here the repellent monk, Frère

Milotus, *listens* to hairs sprouting in his skin, as the contents of his heaving stomach ('l'estomac écœuré') seem to invade the choking heat of his room and his brain loses its cognitive agency, replaced by inert matter:

> L'écœurante chaleur gorge la chambre étroite,
> Le cerveau du bonhomme est bourré de chiffons,
> Il écoute les poils pousser dans sa peau moite. (ll. 26-28)

Thus, acoustic eruptions collide with manifestations of thermal and epidermal disgust, betokening insanity, disarray, turmoil, and decline.

Threats to corporeal and mental integrity reverberate through non-verbal sound-making, from the 'hoquets fort gravement bouffons' of Brother Milotus to the 'affreux rire de l'idiot' that erupts in the prologue of *Une saison en enfer* as the narrator anticipates his own rasping death rattle: 'tout dernièrement, m'étant trouvé sur le point de faire le dernier *couac*, j'ai songé à rechercher la clef du festin ancien' (prologue). Rimbaud exploits the poetic resources of non-verbal language, in the array of shrieks, screams, groans, and roars that express existential anguish, and also in the whirring looms of modern industry ('Ouvriers', *Illuminations*) that suggest dehumanizing mechanical processes or, quite simply, dehumanization.

Stomaching Modernism

Abnormal kinaesthesia is a structuring feature of Rimbaud's monstering: there is the creaking horror of 'Vénus anadyomène' ('une tête / De femme à cheveux bruns fortement pommadés / D'une vieille baignoire émerge, lente et bête', ll. 1–3), a poem to which I shall return. There are poems where organs and limbs appear to move in partial disconnection from the body's presumed integrity and autonomy. Such instances are related to visceral disgust and to a sharp sense of the abject that passes from the subject to the reader: in 'Accroupissements', the monk *moves* his sickened stomach, adjusting his purulent paunch under the bed sheets: 'Le frère Milotus un œil à la lucarne / […] / Déplace dans les draps son ventre de curé' (ll. 2, 5). The monk's slow shifting belly connects with the stirring monstrosity of Rimbaud's anti-Venus as the abject travels across synchronous texts and contexts, consolidating visions of impotence and failure that may be social, cultural, or aesthetic. At the same time, Rimbaud's image of the confined Milotus calls to mind Samuel Beckett's Malone on

his (death) bed, his body the object of involuntary mechanicity or spasmodic intentionality.[8] Here we gain once more a sense of Rimbaud's exploration of irresolvable human questions of aging, solitude, frustrated desire, and finitude, and of his contribution to modernist literature's extended interrogation of the disenchanted consciousness.

Infirmity provokes disgust that takes a more active and more generative turn in the furious revolt ('férocité') of the modernist self in *Une saison en enfer*, fuelled by the exasperated desire to destroy in order to make new. Kinaesthetic slowness is countered now by aggressive agility and animal energy ('j'ai fait le bond sourd de la bête féroce' (prologue)) and leads to a prompt self-identification with the 'féroces infirmes retour des pays chauds' that is captured in the call to gustative, auditory, and kinaesthetic action: 'Faim, soif, cris, danse, danse, danse, danse !' ('Mauvais sang').

The translation of other kinds of horror in *Une saison enfer* surfaces in the gustatory disgust revealed in the sequence entitled 'L'Impossible': 'Nous mangeons la fièvre avec nos légumes aqueux' parodies the obediency of acts of mortification. The limning of unquestioning conformity with Catholic doctrine contrasts with the conversion of aversive eating into a gustatory challenge and a modernist provocation, in 'Faim' ('Délires II').[9] The incorporation of the monstrous and the abnormal proclaimed in 'Faim' is envisioned positively and in ways that register the expansion of the modernist project beyond assumed categorial boundaries and familiar distinctions. Here the world enters self through the narrator's affirmative ingestion of mud, iron, venom, and stone, linked to actions kinaesthetic and acoustic:

> Si j'ai du goût, ce n'est guère
> Que pour la terre et les pierres.
> Je déjeune toujours d'air,
> De roc, de charbons, de fer.
>
> Mes faims, tournez. Paissez, faims,
> Le pré des sons.

[8] Samuel Beckett, *Malone meurt* (Paris. Minuit, 1951).

[9] Gustatory values are the most critically neglected in cultural and literary studies of the sensorium. Michelle Coghlan (ed.), *Tasting Modernism*, a special number of *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2014, considers this lacuna and opens perspectives on culinary practice and modernist design that build on the relational values of gustatory and aesthetic taste.

Attirez le gai venin
Des liserons.

Mangez les cailloux qu'on brise,
Les vieilles pierres d'églises ;
Les galets des vieux déluges,
Pains semés dans les vallées grises.

Human Comedy, Social Fantasy

In the prose poem 'Vies' (*Illuminations*), the retrospective narrator contemplates his acquisition of cultural knowledge and sums up his life's work: 'j'ai connu le monde, j'ai illustré la comédie humaine' ('Vies', part III). With echoes of Balzac's authorial life-project, the narrator defines his vocation and activity in three areas: the observation of social mores and cultural differences; the critique of the repetitions of the self-same across boundaries of class, continent, institution, locale, age, and gender; and the process of figuration and visualization ('illustrer'). That social comedy uncovers, in the myriad embodiments of the grotesque populating Rimbaud's corpus, evocative sources of the perennial and profoundly human.

Rimbaud's target is, frequently, the social monster, a figure central to the fantasy of many of the *Poésies*, and one that morphs into the diverse forms of *Une saison en enfer* and *Illuminations*. The social monster is the progeny of the dominant culture and the scion of prevailing values; the monster is an everyday insider in a world founded on specious values. Everyday monsters include the bourgeois, colonialist exploiters, institutional figures, as exemplified by the assembly of inflated bodies squatting on the town-square benches in 'A la musique' (*Poésies*). In this social satire, the burghers of Charleville form a parade of grotesques whose extortionate appearance is matched by their ponderous movements and asinine brains. Acquisitive and devouring, they dance to the frenzied tunes of capitalism, which certain prose poems of *Illuminations* denounce in a recurrent critique of colonialist ventures and capitalist values: 'Soir historique', for example, opens with a portrait of the innocent tourist in the land of capitalist hyperactivity. The hapless visitor seeks temporary solace – 'retiré de nos horreurs économiques' – in the distractions of a theatrical phantasmagoria that is an inevitable extension of capitalism itself with its endless reproduction of the self-same ('La même magie bourgeoise à tous les points

où la malle nous déposera !'). The free-verse poem 'Mouvement' (*Illuminations*) evokes the 'monstrous' cargo of plans and strategies embarked by colonialist venturers who export their wisdom, ideologies, and values with missionary zeal as they seek, no less obsessively, their 'fortune chimique personnelle':

> – On voit, roulant comme une digue au-delà de la route hydraulique motrice,
> Monstrueux, s'éclairant sans fin, – leur stock d'études ;
> Eux chassés dans l'extase harmonique
> Et l'héroïsme de la découverte.

Monstrosity is a systemic, endemic part of the experiential reality of material progress. Rimbaud, as modernist, is a poet of productive mutations – of vision and voice, of language and idiom, of syntax and structure that challenge hegemonic cultural and discursive formations. Troped as acerbic responses to the irredeemably monstrous, such mutations expose – vividly and scathingly through modes of irony and grotesque inflation – the constraining socio-economic ideology and value-systems.

Wes Williams, in his major study *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic*, argues that that the monstrous is foundational to what it is to be human, and formative of lived experience.[10] Williams demonstrates how, in the early modern era in Western Europe, the monster is no mere metaphor but a powerful construct of the imagination and a site of cultural anxieties and social tensions. There is something remarkably similar at work in Rimbaud's writing of monstrosity as an integral part of the modernist's critical world view and key to the modernist pursuit of paradox and equivocation.

What is the value of monstrosity for the narrator and for the reader? The poet scrutinizes the other as we might – harnessing lucidity and courage – self-scrutinize. He holds a critical mirror up to what we might see if we were emboldened or obliged to look at ourselves, and we gain a sense of a persistent, probing specular gaze. How, precisely, does the poet draw us into the contemplation of the monstrous that is our specular image?

Certain early poems of *Poésies* take us, slowly and obsessively, into the wizened minds and hearts of grotesque human subjects as Rimbaud holds up a mirror

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[10] Wes Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

to monstrous forms that are uncannily recognizable. Scrutinizing those who scrutinize in 'Les Assis', the narrator evokes the mute hideousness – the monocular monstrosity – of the seated men as they peer into their books and papers. In the black-and-white medium of the poem, the evocation of green, black, and grey/bone-white conjures stark chromatic values that amplify the horror of the occluded – and occluding – gaze of the seated ones:

> Noirs de loupes, grêlés, les yeux cerclés de bagues
> Vertes, leurs doigts boulus crispés à leurs fémurs,
> Le sinciput plaqué de hargnosités vagues
> Comme les floraisons lépreuses des vieux murs ;
>
> Ils ont greffé dans des amours épileptiques
> Leur fantasque ossature aux grands squelettes noirs
> De leurs chaises ; leurs pieds aux barreaux rachitiques
> S'entrelacent pour les matins et pour les soirs !

The seated ones' capacity for seeing is the antithesis of enlightenment revelation and discovery: the folds of their skin harden in the concentricity of thick 'bagues vertes' around the eyes, whilst their black-framed magnifying lenses seem to block their viewing as much as it does the narrator's vision of the (still-)human face. Here, Derrida's abocular hypothesis comes into play – in an instance of viewing that cancels itself out – for these seated figures who are fixated on viewing and on reading, appear unable to see anything as they substitute, for their physical eye, instruments ('loupes') whose visual power, the poem makes clear, is reduced or nil.[11]

The *renvoi* (line 2) that carries over the idea of sickly green provides a chromatic and rhythmic shock, a *punctum*, that 'colours' – in hues of putridness – our mental vision of the seated figures. 'Loupes', a sign of bourgeois ocular instrumentality *par excellence*, sees the social monster of failed viewing become the object of the poet's analytical examination; the myopic figures peer hopelessly through magnifying glasses whilst the poet engages in his own monstrous magnification through descriptions of nauseating vividness and tropes of abjectness. The mentality and the physicality of monsters reflect and compound each other where symptoms of a withered physiology (rough skin, sharp bones, anatomical angularity)

[11] Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle: l'auto-portrait et autres ruines* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990).

signal a distorted psyche. An objective correlative develops whereby the leprous walls seem to extend both their sickness and their capacity to contaminate others. The enforced solitude of each seated individual is common to the rest of the group, whilst, together, they are unnaturally conjoined, congenitally distorted, and collectively grotesque. Rimbaud's use of the present tense draws us into this horror, making the reader envision this obscure and disturbing spectacle of monstrous thingness that draws on, and in turns spurs, a keen sense of human frailty and fallibility.[12]

Monstrous geometry means that what is (normally) naturally curved and pliant in the living body is made angular, jutting, awkward, and misaligned. Bodies are fused to the furniture in a bizarre coupling of corporeality and material object: the human anatomy adheres to the skeletons of the furniture, which seems to have become a living species, the visionary poet effecting a process of xeno-grafting. In a striking modernist chiasmus, the living being becomes more thing-like while the material object assumes human attributes: Rimbaud's collapsing of boundaries and distinctions generates a highly figurative paradox that draws on Gothic horror tropes and opens a more profound interrogation of what it is to be human.

How equivocal is the text and the response it elicits from us? How does revulsion work? Is pity also at work? Does the poem spur in us a sense of empathy with the obscure pariahs of 'Les Assis'? If we reach across the differences between this verse poem of *Poésies* and a prose text of *Illuminations* ('Vagabonds'), we seize something of the significance of poetry as a space of empathic reflection. The narrator of 'Vagabonds' reflects self-critically on his previous lack of compassion for his 'Pitoyable frère' (a specular self-image, or, possibly, a biographical image of Paul Verlaine). He acknowledges that the derision he once turned on that fraternal monster with the ex-orbited eyes and parched mouth precipitated the monstrous other's nightly plunge into impotent, shrieking madness ('[il me tirait] dans la salle en hurlant son songe de chagrin idiot'). The narrator regrets the levity with which he exploited the other's suffering and recognizes that his lack of empathy dead-ended in exile and slavery that constrained both perpetrator and victim ('Je m'étais joué de son infirmité. Par ma faute nous retournions en exil et en esclavage.'). The narrator's self-critique,

[12] Studies of skin in literature include Abbie Carrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013). Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Skin* (Chichester: John Wiley, 2012) is a brilliant cultural studies essay on haptic values and the fuller sensorium that reaches out from architecture to chart the phenomenological capacity of modern experience.

spurred by his realization of having imposed his vision of his victim's disempowerment on that other, seems to pre-empt Sartre's critique of bad faith. 'Vagabonds' is a poem of recrimination and specular self-scrutiny where monsters effectively change places, and where monstrosity, assumed and inhabited, gives rise to an experience of purifying reflection.

The monster stands apart as the figure that society recognizes, with horror, as profoundly other *and* disturbingly familiar, even – in specular terms – similar. Whilst the monster embodies the negative values that the narrator as outsider judges dysfunctional or exploitative in society, the narrator has, at the same time, to assume the task of actively creating monsters, reversing the lens and holding up to us the image of the monster that can bring about generative change and progressive creativity.

So, monsters also have positive value, and, when identified with social, political, cultural, and creative agency, they challenge sclerotic thinking, subvert cultural authority, and speak back to social and political oppression.

The confrontation with bourgeois aesthetic hegemony provokes positive acts of monstering. One key instance of this is where normative beauty is assailed: conventional beauty and the ideal of perfection need to be turned into monstrosity (that is, seen for what they are) in order to be critiqued and cast aside. In 'Vénus anadyomène', the assault on pulchritude and, by extension, the poem's attack on values synonymous with Academy-sponsored art of the Second Empire (the pastiche mythologies of Cabanel and Bouguereau) takes the form of a monster. Whilst some monsters just happen, surfacing from primeval depths, the modernist may envision others lurking in a rusting bathtub. Rimbaud's anti-Venus is a monster, one more constructed than discovered, a monster that he worked at, and one that he asks his reader in turn to work at – encountering it in gradual, intentional fashion.

To read 'Vénus anadyomène' is to contemplate horror rising slowly; it is to participate in an assault on bourgeois taste. Abject and fascinating, Rimbaud's anti-Venus is at once woman and unnameable 'thing', a creature whose scandalous indeterminacy is captured in the phrase 'horrible étrangement'. The adjective/adverb pairing rehearses here the modernist collapsing of distinctions between monstrosity and attraction in a proleptic move towards the poem's explosive conclusion: 'belle hideusement d'un ulcère à l'anus'.

Wendy Steiner has taken issue with modernism's 'savaging' of normative beauty – its pressured representation (its monstering, even). In her study of the concept and practice of beauty in modern visual and literary culture, *The Trouble with Beauty*, Steiner offers a gender-informed account of the relation between beauty and avant-garde experimentalism.[13] Steiner argues that beauty (which she implicitly genders feminine) comes under the assault of radical (masculinist) modernism; consequently, Steiner's argument runs, beauty is violated, femininity is devalued, and literature and art are made harsh and misogynistic. Modernism is, in other words, something rather monstrous (and, for Steiner, not in a positive way …). The first premise of Steiner's argument is familiar: feminine agency is constrained historically in the practice of modernism, and women's creativity is silenced in the historiography of modernist aesthetics.[14] Steiner's second premise defines modernism as an impersonal art that displaces values of harmony, normative order, verisimilitude, and readerliness with values of fracture, disruption, and dissolution.[15] What Steiner proposes, at one level (positively), as a corrective to gender-vacant assumptions of hegemonic modernism has the effect of producing, at another level, a revisionist assessment of modernist literature and visual art that generates a non-progressive vision of beauty, one that looks back to traditionalist Western assumptions of feminine perfection and the pictorial ideal.

What I am arguing, in the case of Rimbaud, is that gender and modernist imperatives coincide in a more capacious and dynamic vision of beauty that deconstructs normative values and hegemonic representations. This connects with Patti Smith's celebration of Rimbaud's 'new beauties, new horrors'.[16] Smith's contiguous placing of purportedly antithetical values suggests that Rimbaud, in conjugating poetry and monstrosity sets the paradoxical sparks flying. 'Vénus anadyomène' relates prospectively to Rimbaud's poetic narrative of the savaging of

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[13] Wendy Steiner, *The Trouble with Beauty* (London: William Heinemann, 2011).

[14] Those linked phenomena have long been recognized and, in the gender-illuminated context of the early twenty-first century, women's creativity is increasingly foregrounded (I am thinking of Whitney Chadwick's major study of Surrealist women writers and painters, *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998)).

[15] Most commentators in modernism deploy (though not uncritically) the critical discourse of 'fracture', 'disorder', 'brutality', with the single difference that those terms deployed by the modernist would assume a neutral or affirmative charge, not a pejorative one as they do in Steiner.

[16] Quoted in Robb, *Rimbaud*, p. xv.

Hortense's performance in the prose poem 'H' (*Illuminations*): 'toutes les monstruosités violent les gestes atroces d'Hortense'. In *Leaving Parnassus: The Lyric Subject in Verlaine and Rimbaud*, Seth Whidden undertakes a deep and detailed reading of this enigmatic prose text, arguing that Hortense, caught in the relentless conflict between technicity and the desire to undo the mechanical, is the object of time's tyranny.[17] Hortense, who, I venture, is in some ways comparable with Rimbaud's anti-Venus, is the victim violated, and also a fascinating monster. Hortense is the female beast that turns an erotics into a mechanics and transforms the potential of love into a ceaselessly whirring dynamo. This resonates with the denunciation of beauty and love, as impoverished, withered, and abject in 'Vénus anadyomène' and, subsequently, in the opening sequence of *Une saison en enfer*:

> Jadis, si je me souviens bien, ma vie était un festin où s'ouvraient tous les cœurs, où tous les vins coulaient. Un soir, j'ai assis la Beauté sur mes genoux. — Et je l'ai trouvée amère. — Et je l'ai injuriée.
>
> Je me suis armé contre la justice.
>
> Je me suis enfui. Ô sorcières, ô misère, ô haine, c'est à vous que mon trésor a été confié !
>
> Je parvins à faire s'évanouir dans mon esprit toute l'espérance humaine. Sur toute joie pour l'étrangler j'ai fait le bond sourd de la bête féroce.
>
> J'ai appelé les bourreaux pour, en périssant, mordre la crosse de leurs fusils. J'ai appelé les fléaux, pour m'étouffer avec le sable, le sang. Le malheur a été mon dieu. Je me suis allongé dans la boue. Je me suis séché à l'air du crime. Et j'ai joué de bons tours à la folie.
>
> Et le printemps m'a apporté l'affreux rire de l'idiot.

As well as inventing monsters, it is also, often, about becoming a monster oneself, as the prologue to *Une saison en enfer* asserts defiantly. Art and politics are related through the central figure of the self-turned-monster that is foundational to a project that transgresses boundaries, collapses distinctions, and challenges the status quo, propelling generative change.

In the early weeks of the Prussian Siege of Paris, in the Autumn of 1870, Rimbaud's mind is turned to monsters. He creates a monstrous phantasmagoria in 'Rêvé pour l'hiver' (*Poésies*), where the narrator fantasizes a future erotic encounter in a carriage and conjures up, through the window-pane, a vision of nocturnal

[17] Seth Adam Whidden, *Leaving Parnassus: The Lyric Subject in Verlaine and Rimbaud* (Amsterdam–Atlanta, GA.: Rodopi, 2007). pp. 183–94.

shadows: these appear in the spectral form of ‘ces monstruosités hargneuses, populace / De démons noirs et de loups noirs’ (ll. 7–8). In this short poem, nightmarish fantasy melds erotic desire, social turmoil, and latent political anxiety (‘populace’) with an entirely unexceptional fear of the dark. The work of poetic fantasy turns around the sexual desire and anxiety of a young bourgeois woman alarmed by the sight of a ‘populace’ of dark, unnameable others. The threat of the unknown other infiltrates representations of the social body that takes the form of a rebellious underclass; these political terrors coincide with anxieties about erotic relations and about social crossings.

The monster embodies a more explicit form of political agency that is disruptive and energized, uncontainable and expressive of the desire of the repressed social group. The eponymous blacksmith of ‘Le Forgeron’ (*Poésies*), as the people’s representative, blasts the tradition of monarchic legitimacy with his violent discourse and threatening gestures.

Rimbaud’s Blacksmith is monstrous in the traditional sense of physical might and epic proportions, and he represents the uncontainably monstrous in the eyes of the *ancien régime*. Mighty and maddened by the urgency of the revolutionary political project, the Blacksmith–Monster is perceived from the perspective of authority as ‘effrayant / D’ivresse et de grandeur’, le front vaste, riant / Comme un clairon d’airain, avec toute sa bouche, / Et prenant ce gros-là [Louis XVI] dans son regard farouche’ (ll.1–4). The People, turned into a collective monster, destroy the other monster long turned upon them – the Bastille prison (‘cette bête suait du sang à chaque pierre’, l. 60). Envisioned as the incarnation of brute nature (‘“ça bave, ça monte, ça pullule”’, l. 112), the People expose (*monstrare*) their rage and their intent: ‘La foule épouvantable avec des bruits de houle / Hurlant comme une chienne, hurlant comme une mer …’ (ll. 104-05); the Blacksmith with ‘sa main large et superbe de crasse’ symbolizes indomitable political agency, the sign of the monster rising from below (l. 176). The Blacksmith challenges Louis XVI and blasts the beggared brains and bloated bellies of sovereign authority: ‘cerveaux plats et […] ventres-dieux’ (ll. 97-98). Adopting the identity of ‘crapule’ – the scum – the insult thrown at the people by the King’s courtier, the Blacksmith assumes political agency through the exuberant embrace of the aversive and the impure, like the narrator–creator of ‘Vénus anadyomène’ or like the poet who is the consumer of iron and stone in ‘Faim’ (*Une saison en enfer*).

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In ‘Alchimie du verbe’ (*Une saison en enfer*) monstrosity is what the modernist poet sees, imagines, hallucinates, and profoundly desires, as part of a visionary project founded on morphing and metamorphosis:

> Je m’habituai à l’hallucination simple : je voyais très franchement une mosquée à la place d'une usine, une école de tambours faite par des anges, des calèches sur les routes du ciel, un salon au fond d'un lac; les monstres, les mystères …

The contiguity of the values of monstrosity and mystery here seems to call up the older sense of the ‘marvellous’ – ‘le prodige’ of early modern culture – aligning these with modernist marvels that challenge normative thinking and undo Cartesian rationalism through feats of visionary audacity, simultaneity, syntactic disruption, and semantic hybridity. The collocation of ‘monstres’ and ‘mystères’ suggests affinity in difference: monstrosity is mysterious, and mystery is monstrous, challenging us to engage in acts of deep looking and imaginative leaping. As the narrator retells his experience of metamorphosis, the revelation performs a series of visionary alterations, as the *passé historique* captures an experience of aesthetic change that is unique and absolute.

In Rimbaud’s writing, the imagination is ‘monstrous’ in its capacity to self-generate, to bring forth unprecedented forms based on continuous processes of displacement and innovation: ‘*a* **à la place de** *b*’. This is manifest from the earliest iconic texts, like ‘Voyelles’, where the ‘neutral’ value of a specific vowel belies its capacity to create chromatic landscapes where visual instances morph into olfactory and haptic values, and where all the senses are held together and destabilized, simultaneously and mesmerically.

Reading across *Poésies*, *Une saison en enfer*, and certain key texts of *Illuminations* has revealed how integral monstrosity is to Rimbaud’s modernist project: monstrosity provides the momentum of poetic modernism in its socio-cultural and its aesthetic dimensions; it challenges the very conditions of reading through the disruption of normative sense-making and the adventitious exploration of visionary space.

Monsters move and morph across Rimbaud's *oeuvre*: they surface in manifold protean guises: articulating voices that screech or rasp; projecting a gaze that darts and pierces; freighted with an intent that is malevolent or exasperated, bitter or pernicious. Monsters get underneath the skin: they penetrate the brain, they haunt the memory, they stalk the imagination. Monsters are 'out there' – in society, exposed by the poet's socio-critical gaze, and transformed by his visionary project. Monsters are also 'in here', indissociable from the subjectivity of Rimbaud's mutant 'je'. 'Je est un autre' and there is nothing more *other* – and more familiar – than the monster within. In *Poésies*, *Une saison en enfer* and in *Illuminations*, the crossing of indeterminate continents and indistinct histories, altering landscapes and porous dreamscapes reveals the protean figure of the monster as an agent of energy and invention, desire and action.

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